Centrality in the Ethics of Peirce

BY

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By centrality we do not mean to refer to that section of concepts or exposition in Peirce to which the greatest physical space of wordage has been devoted; but rather to those concepts—usually more or less implicit or else given under the form of generally unfamiliar coined terms in which Peirce is so rich—which are essential to the unity of all Peirce's other concepts. That is, by centrality we do not mean spatial importance or even necessarily verbal emphasis but rather philosophical primacy.

Nor by ethics do we understand here merely that normative science to which Peirce importantly refers,[1] in his classification of the sciences, along with logic and aesthetics, but rather those "judgments of the Sensible Heart" which he constantly, either by direct implication or by specific reference, regards most vital and fundamental to all inquiry.

Considering the brilliance and profundity of his views, Peirce has been, until recently, in the first half of the twentieth century, far too long denied his just degree of recognition in the progress of thought. Hitherto he went unnoticed by and large, except where his pragma-

[1] *E. g.*, Justus Buchler: *The Philosophy of Peirce* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1940), p. 62, although we could find much support for our thesis even within the rather limited scope of this meaning of ethics. Thus (*ibid.*): "Ethics . . . is the theory of self-controlled or deliberate conduct. Logic is the theory of self-controlled deliberate thought; and as such, must appeal to ethics for its principles."

tism was misunderstood by nineteenth- and even twentieth-century schools and expositors of "pragmatism," including the psychologistic behavioral philosophies.

After being unnoticed, if that has been his lot, the next stage in the historical development of a great thinker is usually to be widely *mis*understood, and to be seized upon piecemeal by various minor and trivial schools in support of their picayune doctrines, in the most arrantly selfish disregard of the unity of his thought which, if taken in its entirety, would quickly annihilate their separate sophistries and demonstrate the intellectual illegality and lack of any authority for such misleading misappropriations. Such a phenomenon is quite evident in the case of Charles Peirce where it is even more easily carried out undetected and uncriticized since the philosophy of Peirce is admittedly so difficult of classification or pigeonholing, in view both of his comprehensiveness and his castigation of the *misuse* of the very concepts or methods which he then adopts in their honest applications. Deity, analytical thought, logic, love, law, living spontaneity, head and heart are all at home and friends in the full understanding of Peirce's philosophy which he felt had to be as wide and deep as life itself to be adequate to the understanding of life. He painted on a canvas as vast as Melville's *Moby Dick*, but he painted not gloomily but positively.

Peirce has been seized by various logical schools, and that narrowing fact has left the erroneous impression that he is distinctly a logician in his contribution to philosophy, and particularly a pioneer symbolic logician. The error in this view is not that it is wrong *eo ipso*, but that it is essentially omissive, and hence dangerously misinformative and unacceptable to sound philosophic criticism. Peirce was a full-blown philosopher, and the applications of his thought to political economy, ethics, and metaphysics, as well as to logic and epistemology, are all to be found in his works. Indeed even the most cursory unbiased reading will show that beneath every logical formulation in Peirce there lies an ethical consideration of the most basic sort. The neglect of this foundational substratum means nothing less

than the toppling of any superficial superstructure of words purporting to interpret or understand Peirce's philosophy.

Again, with the avidity that a parasitic organism clutches a healthy one, various types of behaviorism have attached themselves to parts of Peirce's thought in attempts to justify themselves with the strength of some honest thinker, begged, borrowed, or stolen, to fortify their felt but unacknowledged, inconsistencies, the most primal of which is the bad confusion of intelligibility with existence. The latest example of the behavioristic maladaptation of Peirce is C. W. Morris' *Signs, Language and Behavior* (1946) which, despite its several merits should certainly not quote Peirce as the progenitor of its line of thought or even as an influential thinker in consonance with its conclusions.[2] In this very connection of Morris' work, John Dewey wrote in the *Journal of Philosophy*: "'Users' of Peirce's writings should either stick to his basic pattern or let him alone."[3]

In general, nominalistic or verbalistic extremists have taken shells of thought from Peirce and left the kernels, incidentally having also chosen to forget Peirce's competent and conclusive critiques of verbalism and nominalism (including behaviorism), particularly in their skeptical and necessitarian emphases.[4] The spontaneity of life, the command of law, and the integration of love were for Peirce the roots of all things and were interwoven with the texture and substances of all experiences. To set up any one of these without the others was to misrepresent and misunderstand that one, except that the last, the *agapastic* element, contained the other two—life as spontaneous unpredictability, and law or reaction—as parts of its very development and exhibition of its own nature. This is a far cry from the one-sidedness and sterility of those ethically immature or emasculated credos of logicalism or behaviorism, which (and Peirce never lost sight of this) are at best the partial implementation of a philosophy

[2] *Vide* "The New 'Semiotic'" by Arthur F. Bentley, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 8, September 1947, pp. 129-30.

[3] Vol. 43, 1946, pp. 85 f. Also quoted in Bentley, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 ff.

[4] *E. g.*, Hartshorne and Weiss, Editors, *Collected Papers of Charles Peirce* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1935), Vol. VI, pp. 41, 361-2; Vol. III, pp. 260-2; also Vol. VI, pp. 109, 372, *et. al.*

adequate to the stature of man and the world of which his life is a part. Peirce was a believer in and user of signs only for what they could reveal, and was not a builder of babel in love with mental games *per se*. He was far too conscientious and honest a thinker, and too regardful of his reader's edification in this respect, to adopt any lesser course. Even in these considerations, is the fundamental ethical message of Peirce's thought apparent as the ridgepole of its canopy.

Logic is usually regarded as a formal, self-sufficient discipline in philosophy, certainly having no direct bearing or dependence on ethics. Along with this academic viewpoint, however, has proceeded the inextinguishable and universal observation from experience that the logic or reasoning of a dishonest or insincere man was of little value, either with regard to the truth of its statements or the validity of its conclusions.

For Peirce, what are usually regarded simply as principles of good character were part and parcel of the necessary equipment for true demonstrations on the part of the logician, or for that matter any systematic thinker and analyst. Peirce states quite unequivocally:

> The logic which observational sciences uses is not, like the logic the books teach, quite independent of the motive and spirit of the reasoner. There is an ethics indissolubly bound up with it—an ethics of fairness and impartiality.[5]

The pertinence of this fact to philosophical thinking, if it is not indeed immediately apparent, will quickly become so when we stop to note that Peirce considered philosophy in all its branches as an observational science since its conclusions, as those in any branch of knowledge, must be founded upon observation from some realm of human experience. Peirce is very Kantian in his downright refusal to countenance any "pure speculation" divorced from any set of empirical facts.

The ethics of fair reasoning, and sincere and honest thinking, were to Peirce—and are to all thinkers who have no dogmatic ax to grind and who are not effete with obstructive skepticism—the very

[5] *Id.*, Vol. VI, pp. 4-5.

basis of logical demonstration and communication. This conclusion is not merely a noble belief on Peirce's part; it is a standard, practical, and demonstrable fact in any discussion, and is immediately evident from the fact that dissimulation is the very antithesis of communication, which seeks to reveal, and does not dissemble, or seek to divert or delay inquiry.

In view of the preceding remarks it can perhaps now be seen how one of the grossest of all misinterpretations to which Peirce could be subjected is the construing of his "fallibilism" as some kind of a paralyzing epistemological skepticism. His emphasis and his use of the term were, on the contrary, profoundly optimistic as denoting the ever-widening possibilities of emergence of hitherto unknown or unsuspected truths into analytic thought—truths which heretofore had lain hidden in the great "vagues" of pervasively general observation, yet dimly connected with the known by the synechism or continuity of all thought.

The misinterpretation of Peirce's fallibilism is consequential upon the ignoring of the ethical character of his thought; fallibilism for Peirce is essentially and profoundly an attitude of intellectual humility. Being quite clear on this point, he writes (italics his):

> . . . the first step toward *finding out* is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already; so that no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness; and ninety-nine out of every hundred good heads are reduced to impotence by that malady—of whose inroads they are most strangely unaware!
>
> Indeed, out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire to find things out, all my philosophy has always seemed to me to grow . . .[6]

With respect to this basic "desire to find out," Peirce rightly insisted that this too must be honest and sincere, and not merely verbally simulated with tongue in cheek. We must *feel* our doubt, and

[6] *The Philosophy of Peirce*, p. 4.

not just play with it, in order to achieve any worth-while or veridical philosophical results. He aptly remarks:

> Some philosophers have imagined that to start any inquiry it was only necessary to utter a question whether orally or by setting it down upon paper, and have even recommended us to begin our studies with questioning everything! But the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief. There must be a real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle. . . . The settlement of opinion is the sole end of inquiry.[7]

Now let us contrast with these sentiments Peirce's criticism of sterile skepticism, or nominalism of the Humean variety, and note how diametrically opposed such views are to his. Thus he wrote:

> Scepticism, in the sense of doubt of the validity of elementary ideas—which is really a proposal to turn an idea out of court and permit no inquiry into its applicability—is doubly condemned by the fundamental principle of scientific method—condemned first as obstructing inquiry, and concerned second, because it is treating something other than a statistical ratio as a thing to be argued about. . . . The last fifty years have taught the lesson of not trifling with facts and not trusting to principles and methods . . . which serve only to exclude testimony from consideration.[8]

Again:

> When we regard ideas in a nominalistic . . . way, the simplest facts of mind become utterly meaningless. That one idea should resemble another, or influence another, or that one state of mind should so much as be thought of in another, is, from this standpoint, sheer nonsense.[9]

And of necessitarianism, of the type reflected in much of modern behaviorism, Peirce has this to say:

[7] *Id.* p. 11.
[8] *Id.*, pp. 377 and 52.
[9] *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. VI, p. 109.

> Necessitarianism cannot logically stop short of making the whole action of mind a part of the physical universe. Our notion that we decide what we are going to do, if, as the necessitarian says, it has been calculable since the earliest times, is reduced to illusion. Indeed, consciousness in general thus becomes a merely illusory aspect of a material system. What we call red, green, and violet are in reality only different rates of vibration . . . feeling is a mere fragmentary and illusive aspect of the universe . . . a phantom. . . . This is the way, then, that necessitarianism has to make up its accounts. It enters consciousness under the head of sundries, as a forgotten trifle.[10]

The ethical drift and vital import of Peirce's unhesitant excoriations of those niggardly scientific or philosophical credos which would seek to deny men values and their conscious autonymous choice of values in action, needs no further commentary. He was equally clear in his criticisms of the philosophical, or rather unphilosophical, intention so prevalently motivating the classical doctrines of political economy. Thus he writes:

> . . . The old-fashioned political economist adored, as alone capable of redeeming the human race, the glorious principle of individual greed, although as this principle requires for its action hypocrisy and fraud, he generally threw in some dash of inconsistent concessions to virtue, as a sop to the vulgar Cerberus.[11]
>
> Political economy has its formula of redemption, too. It is this: Intelligence in the service of greed ensures the justest prices, the fairest contracts, the most enlightened conduct of all the dealings between men, and leads to the *summum bonum*, food in plenty and perfect comfort. Food for whom? Why, for the greedy master of intelligence.[12]
>
> Here, then, is the issue. The gospel of Christ says that progress comes from every individual merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors. On the other side,

[10] *Id.*, p. 42.
[11] *The Philosophy of Peirce*, p. 48.
[12] *Id.*, p. 363.

> the conviction of the nineteenth century is that progress takes place by virtue of every individual's striving for himself with all his might and trampling his neighbor under foot whenever he gets a chance to do so. This may accurately be called the Gospel of Greed.[13]

Evidently in this respect things have not changed much since the nineteenth century.

Hypocritical theology, pretending to know what it knows it does not know, and substituting word-mongering for frank avowals, receives as little comfort from Peirce as did hypocritical economics:

> I once bought and read through Dr. Schaff's three volumes upon the *Creeds of Christendom* for the purpose of ascertaining whether the theologians, who composed them, had ever once, from the first to the last, inserted a single clause in one of them by way of recognition of the principle of love; and I found that such a thing had never been done. But then we must remember that, that principle being fully admitted by all Christians, its insertion would not have served to damn anybody.[14]

Peirce's profundity of ethical conception avoids both the self-centeredness of hedonism[15] and the blindly smug or unfeeling self-righteousness of the worship of duty *per se*. As to the first, Peirce's *agapism* or love-doctrine too essentially includes others' welfare to be merely shallowly hedonistic; and as to the second, his doctrine makes it quite clear that ethical or any other principles should never be falsely exalted into be-alls and end-alls that hinder instead of help the uplifting and betterment of men's lives and understanding. Quite obviously, love is incompatible with tyranny, whether of the outward kind or of the more reprehensible intellectual, moral, or spiritual variety.

[13] *Id.*, p. 364.

[14] *Id.*, p. 312.

[15] *Id.*, p. 307. Thus in his review of Karl Pearson's *Grammar of Science*, he says, "All motives that are directed toward pleasure or self-satisfaction . . . will be . . . inevitably destined to miss the satisfaction at which they aim."

In an arresting and interesting passage fraught with richly practical ethical consequences, he writes:

> The movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony. This seems complicated when stated so; but it is fully summed up in the simple formula we call the Golden Rule. . . . Love is not directed to abstractions but to persons . . . to our own dear ones, our family and neighbours.[16]

And again:

> Growth comes only from love, from—I will not say self-*sacrifice*, but from the ardent impulse to fulfill another's highest impulse.[17]

Before proceeding further it would be well now to examine briefly the three basic categorical concepts which we previously referred to and exemplified as the spontaneity of life, the necessitous ordering of law and the integration of life—concepts which Peirce technically designated as Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness respectively, and which we may summarize in order as *state*, *change*, and *interrelation*.

Firstness is *quality*, characterized by a nonrelational singleness of self-nature, and a consequent *monadic* consciousness, or simple awareness as redness, roughness, pain, and so on. Secondness is *reaction*, distinguished *par excellence* by a change, *i.e.*, an event, and hence to be associated with a distinctively *dyadic* awareness of "myself being affected or forced by some other." Thirdness inherently involves not only the experiential duality of secondness, but the *mediation* thereof by a third factor, through which the other two attain an interpretation or meaning and which is thus expressible as a *triadic* or characteristically human type of consciousness in which the assignment of significance arises and is involved.

[16] *Id.*, p. 362.
[17] *Id.*, p. 362.

Some of Peirce's own phrases in the matter of these delineations follow, as a further clarification:

> The first category comprises the qualities of phenomena.[18]
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> Immediate feeling is the consciousness of the first.[19]
>
> Quality is the monadic element of the world.[20]
>
> The second category of elements of phenomena comprises the actual facts. The qualities, in so far as they are general, are somewhat vague and potential. But an occurrence is perfectly individual. It happens here and now.[21]
>
> The kind of thing to which the word "experience" is more particularly applied—is an event. . . . It is the special field of experience to acquaint us with events, with changes of perception.[22]
>
> Continuity represents Thirdness almost to perfection. Every process comes under that head. Moderation is a kind of Thirdness.[23]

And he sums up the three as follows:

> First is the conception of being or existing independent of anything else. Second is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the concept of mediation, whereby a first and a second are brought into relation. . . . Chance is First, Law is Second. . . . Evolution is Third.[24]

It is important here to distinguish between connotations of "law," which we (and Peirce) have so far used in its aspect of necessity or forced determination, wherein it belongs under the category of Secondness. In Peirce's phrase, "Constraint is a Secondness."[25] But there is another aspect of the meaning of "law" to which Peirce also

[18] *Id.*, p. 77. [19] *Id.*, p. 97. [20] *Id.*, p. 87.

[21] *Id.*, p. 77. Here Peirce has been practically merely rephrased by Whitehead in the latter's "actual occasions."

[22] *Id.*, p. 88. [23] *Id.*, p. 80. [24] *Id.*, pp. 322-323. [25] *Id.*, p. 79.

refers, that of pattern, interrelation, and predictability, all of which are examples of Thirdness. This double *entendre* can be very misleading, unless the reader bears attentively in mind Peirce's own lucidation of the point: "Law as an active force is second, but order and legislation are third."[26] Now we can thoroughly understand how Peirce could make a remark such as that previously quoted, that "Law is Second," and also say, with equal truth and no contradiction, that "the third category of elements of phenomena consists of what we call laws. . . ."[27] Similarly, Peirce sometimes speaks of "mind" as awareness *per se*, untinged with any sense of relation,[28] whence it is a First, and again he uses mind to mean the intellect, or reasoning and conceiving subject,[29] and then the meaning is one of Thirdness. The resolution of these ambiguities—and the fact that they are only verbal, reflects the clearheadedness of his thinking—is essential if we are to appreciate the extreme helpfulness of Peirce's brilliant categories.

It might well be deemed that the three basic phenomenological categories should have been, more accurately, singleness, two-ness, and three-ness; but the ordinal enumeration adopted by Peirce serves an epistemological purpose with him, since qualities and feelings (Firstness) are the very possibility of delineating or realizing experiential occurrences (Secondness), which we then judge and think about (Thirdness). As he himself put it:

> It seems, then, that the true categories of consciousness are: first, feeling, the consciousness which can be included within an instant of time, passive consciousness of quality, without recognition or analysis; second, consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness, sense of resistance, of an external fact, of another something; third, synthetic consciousness, binding time together, sense of learning, thought.[30]

[26] *Id.*, p. 80.
[27] *Id.*, p. 78.
[28] *Id.*, p. 323.
[29] *Vide id.*, p. 78.
[30] *Id.*, p. 95.

It is important for our purposes to note, before going on, that Peirce's "Chance" is far from a merely statistical or mathematicological entity. It represents a direct manifestation of irrespressible life, or awareness, and the *spontaneity* thereof; indeed, spontaneity is a much better translation of Peirce's meaning than the ordinarily more protean term, chance, since Peirce (and this is too often forgotten or conveniently ignored by mathematical or logical commentaries on his thought) unexceptionably conceives Chance as Firstness; and Firstness is, if anything, spontaneity: "The idea of First is predominant in the ideas of freshness, life, freedom. The free is that which has not another behind it determining its actions . . ."[31] Here we see the primal opposition of the idea of Secondness, expressing necessity, cause, force, determination, *et al.* Further, Peirce states: "By thus admitting pure spontaneity or life as a character of the universe . . .[32] thus effecting the final link in the equating of chance, spontaneity and life—all Firstness.

In his discussion of evolutionary theory we are brought one step nearer to Peirce's ultimate ethical conclusion, wherein Thirdness, consummating as love, mediated, harmonizes, and evolves into a symphony all the discords, wars, tyrannies, and oppositions of Secondness, the undeniable function of which is now seen to have been the bringing of previously separately autonymous Firsts into mutual relation and mutual awareness. Painful as that first social awareness might be, it is nevertheless the necessary stage in the effecting and development of an eventual evolutionary interharmony through Thirdness.

With great acuteness Peirce identifies *tychistic* evolutionary theory, that of fortuitous variation—produced through the blind struggle of many units each centered solely in itself—with Firstness; *anacastic*, or necessitarian development with Secondness; and *agapastic* evolution, development through love's individual-social expansion and integration, with Thirdness. Thus, Darwinian evolution is

[31] *Id.*, p. 78.
[32] *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. VI, p. 41.

tychastic; Hegelian, anacastic; Peirceian, agapastic. As to the inadequacy of the proposition of tychism, Peirce candidly notes:

> The *Origin of Species* of Darwin merely extends politico-economic views of progress to the entire realm of animal and vegetable life. The vast majority of our contemporary naturalists hold the opinion that the true cause of those exquisite and marvelous adaptations of nature . . . is that creatures are so crowded together that those of them that happen to have the slightest advantage force those less pushing into situations unfavorable to multiplication or even kill them before they reach the stage of reproduction. Among animals, the mere mechanical individualism is vastly reenforced as a power making for good by the animal's ruthless greed. As Darwin puts it on his title-page: it is the struggle for existence; and he should have added for his motto: every individual for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost! Jesus, in his sermon on the Mount, expressed a different opinion.
>
> Much is to be said on both sides. I have not concealed, I could not conceal, my own passionate predilection. Such a confession will probably shock my scientific brethren. Yet the strong feeling is in itself, I think, an argument of some weight in favor of the *agapastic* theory of evolution—so far as it may be presumed to bespeak the normal judgment of the Sensible Heart.[33]

And let us not forget that Peirce's masterly epistemology has left us the eloquent reminder, which we may historically note has enriched the doctrine of any philosopher who knew it and impoverished that of him who did not: "Your heart is also a perceptive organ."[34]

We have yet to consider the conclusion, hitherto but adumbrated, that Thirdness, in its full context as evolutionary love, embraces the First and the Second as but partial aspects of itself. We are already in a position to perceive this in one sense, for the operation of love

[33] *The Philosophy of Peirce*, pp. 363-364. And similarly (*Collected Papers*, Vol. VI, p. 195): "Great respect should be paid to the natural judgments of the sensible heart . . . to condemn it is . . . of all blasphemies the most degrading."

[34] *The Philosophy of Peirce*, pp. 377-378.

embodies the import both of spontaneity and self-dedication or duty. The comprehensive and effectual nature of *agapastic* evolution springs from this fact about the nature of love.

> Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely. That is the sort of evolution which every careful student of my essay "Law of Mind" must see that *synechism* calls for.[35]

In other words,

> . . . the ellipse . . . is a *degenerate* cubic. Just so, tychism and anancasm are degenerate forms of agapasm. . . . Just as love cannot have a contrary, but must embrace what is most opposed to it, as a degenerate case of it, so tychism is a kind of agapasm. Only . . . in genuine agapasm advance . . . takes place by virtue of a positive sympathy among the created springing from continuity of mind. This is the idea which tychisticism knows not how to manage.[36]

Peirce continues:

> The anancasticist might here interpose, claiming that the mode of evolution for which he contends agrees with agapasm at the point at which tychism departs from it. For it makes development go through certain phases, having its inevitable ebbs and flows, yet tending on the whole to a foreordained perfection. Bare existence by this its destiny betrays an intrinsic affinity for the good. Herein, it must be admitted, anancasm shows itself to be in a broad acception a species of agapasm. Some forms of it might easily be mistaken for the genuine agapasm. The Hegelian philosophy is such an anancasticism. . . . Yet, after all, living freedom [*i. e.*, the positive content of Firstness, contained also by Thirdness as love, but not by Secondness or necessity]

[35] *Id.*, p. 363. "Synechism" is Peirce's term for the principle of continuity, and in particular the continuity between all processes, including thought, and explanation, and evolutionary sequences. As he himself succinctly stated (*id.*, p. 355): "In short, synechism amounts to the principle that inexplicabilities are not to be considered as possible explanations." Fallibilism is then seen to be the assertion of the continuity of all occurrence and process, and hence the inadmissibility of isolate exactness, whether of measurement or inference. (*Vide id.*, Ch. 26.)

[36] *Id.*, p. 365.

> is practically omitted from its method. The whole movement is that of a vast engine, impelled by a *vis a tergo*. . . . I mean that such an engine it *would* be if it really worked; but in point of fact, it is a Keely motor.[37]

Stressing the inevitable weaknesses of either tychistic or anancastic evolution, we may point out that selfishly greedy individualism and unyieldingly necessitious law are both at best but corruptions of those partial motive factors in evolution which are brought to their constructive fulfillment and fruition by *agapasm*, which both contains and supersedes the first two, in its scope as well as in its nature.

Thus for Peirce the evolution, individual and social, promoted by the brotherhood or fellowship of love is the primary key to the most comprehensive meaning of life's total unfoldment in all experience. Ethics in the deepest and widest sense is at the very roots of Peirce's philosophy, and forms the connecting link—he would call it the *synechism*—between his epistemology, metaphysics, logic, and cosmology. Thereby we are presented with a magnificent unification—without any loss of analytic specificity—and with an achievement which is one of the finest, sanest, and most far-reaching in American philosophy to date.

[37] *Id.*, p. 365-366.